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An Assessment of the Reference Collection and Services of Four Academic Libraries in Nigeria

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Introduction

The key elements in reference are the collection, the librarians, and the library users. Ifidon (1997) defines reference service as "the springboard to the library and librarianship, wherein one is involved with all aspects of information both theoretical and practical." Ugwanyi (1998) defines reference service as, "the personal assistance given to the user in finding specific information," whether direct or indirect. According to Clark (1997), direct reference service is personal assistance to individual seekers of information. Indirect reference service consists of behind-the-scenes activities including selection, acquisition, processing, and maintenance of library catalogues, bibliographies, other reference aids, and the administration of reference section.

What is a Reference Book?

A reference book is not meant to be read through, but has an array of unrelated entries, which are generally alphabetically arranged. Nwogu (1991) defines reference source as "books not meant to be read from cover to cover but only to be consulted for certain information or facts." He continues in his definition, saying, "these books are expected to be in the library at all times."

Criteria for Evaluating Reference Sources and Materials

There are many reference sources today, and libraries cannot afford all of them. There are common criteria that are used in evaluating these sources:

1. Up-to-date ness: This is especially crucial in the sciences and technology.
2. Authority: The sources must be from an authoritative person, and the contributors, editors, and compilers, must well-qualified.
3. Arrangement: The information contained in the sources should be arranged for easy retrieval.
4. Scope: What subjects are covered.
5. Treatment: The treatment must be appropriate for its audience, e.g., the use of colour photographs in order to be appreciated by children.
6. Illustrations: As necessary and appropriate.
7. Bibliographies: Each article should have a list of references, which, apart from indicating the sources consulted by the author, serves as a guide to further reading for the reader who wishes to study the subject in greater depth.

Sources of Information

There are three basic sources of published information. These are:

- Primary sources
- Secondary sources
- Tertiary sources

Primary Sources

These contain recent and original information. They are considered the most important sources of information, especially for science and technology. Examples are journals, reports, patents, theses and dissertations.

Secondary Sources

These are derived from the primary sources. Examples are abstracts and indexes. Abstracts are brief accounts of the detailed information contained in primary sources while indexes indicate what items of information are contained in the primary sources and the specific location of such items.

Tertiary Sources

These are written and published after consulting the primary sources, with the aid of the secondary sources. They are the analysis of the information contained in the primary sources. Many are voluminous and require much shelving space in the library. Examples are textbook, manuals, and handbooks, dictionaries, encyclopedias, guides, almanacs, yearbooks, gazetteers, treatises, and compends.

Methodology

The methodology used for this research is site visits to the selected libraries. The researchers assessed the collections personally and interviewed the reference librarians. The criteria used for the selection of the libraries was proximity, i.e., accessibility to the researchers.

Results

Delta State University Library

The reference section of the Delta State University, Library, Abraka, has 66 volumes, comprising government publications, almanacs, dictionaries, map and atlases, gazetteers, religious books, encyclopedias, handbooks and manuals, yearbooks, directories, guide books, etc. The reference staff tally the number of users, and of books consulted daily. Reference books do not circulate, and users are not allowed to bring other materials to the reference area.

John Harris Library, University of Benin, Benin City

At this library, the reference section houses the following materials- encyclopedias (both Americana and Britannica), abstracts, dictionaries, directories, bibliographies, yearbooks, prospectuses of Nigerian and foreign universities, past examination questions of all departments within the University, almanacs, the Bible, Koran, *Books in Print*, and the *Guinness Book of World Records*. The staff keeps statistics on reference materials taken for photocopy, number of users and user questions, and mutilated books sent for binding.

Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan

This library is has an area for undergraduates with its own reference section, as well as a separate research library. The research library area admits post-graduate students, researchers, and a few undergraduates with letters of permission from their head of department. The reference collection of the research library, has the following subsections:

- Rare works and theses: Ph.D. theses from 1948 to date.
- Africana: A comprehensive collection of materials written about Africa by Africans and others either residing in Africa or abroad. It includes journals, manuscripts, documents, monographs etc.
- General reference: Subject encyclopedias, dictionaries, directories, etc., shelved by subject.
- Indexes and abstracts.

The staff has these responsibilities:

- Answering reference questions
- Compiling reading lists, bibliographies, and list of new materials
- Indexing and abstracting
- User education
- Current awareness services

University of Port Harcourt Library (UNIPORT Library) Choba Campus

Reference materials are sent from the acquisitions department to the reference section. Cataloguing and processing of reference materials is done by reference staff. The reference section of UNIPORT Library also performs services similar to those listed above for the other libraries.

The information gathered for this paper demonstrates a certain uniformity in collections and operations among a number of academic libraries in Nigeria.

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